

## Child's Story of American Literature

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in the last chapter, was inspired not only by a love of letters and a desire that the new nation might not sink in England's estimation. It was inspired by local patriotism also. The jealousy of the various States, which had so many bad results, was not without a good one, too. This was rivalry. You know yourself how this always spurs you on to greater efforts than you might have made without it.

The three principal cities were each trying to outdo the other. If their rivalry had expressed itself only in this way, it would have been as good in spirit as it was in results. But each of the three sisters was always claiming that the others were Cinderellas. "All you are fit for," cried they shrilly to each other, "is kitchen work. I am the only one of the three who has fine manners and knows how to wear fine clothes. The idea of your setting up to be literary!" In ancient Greece, several States, there was one State, Athens, which was noted for its culture and art; and there was one, Boeotia, which was noted for its commonplaceness and ignorance. All well enough was it for the three cities to keep shouting that each was the Athens of America, but they were forever sneering at the others as Boeotia. A



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magazine in Philadelphia in 1800 said: "Many attempts have been made in vain to establish periodicals in the small town of Boston, but the Bostonians are interested only in making money and prefer the perusal of their meager and time-serving newspapers." And Boston kept returning the compliment, although she must have known that her rival couldn't help seeing that all the time she was abusing Philadelphia she was imploring her citizens not to let Philadelphia get away with the boast that she was the only city in America which could maintain magazines.

But it was true that Philadelphia published and read far more books than either of her sisters; and it was also true that the three of them were far more interested in making money than in making magazines. In the manufacture of both Philadelphia was for a long time easily the first of the three. Envy is very often at the bottom of ridicule, and the joke which still exists to-day about the backwardness of Philadelphia dates to that time when she was so far ahead of the others. Boston and New York, smarting at her superior culture and social development, eased their feelings by a contemptuous snuff; and New York sniffed the louder because she had the greater reason to be jealous. For however Philadelphia and Boston might squabble as to which was Athens, they were both quite sure that nothing could beat New York as Boeotia.

Manhattan had been settled by the Dutch, and one of the obstacles to establishing schools there was that the inhabitants spoke two languages and both of them badly. If you had been born in New York any time during the eighteenth century, you would have been in luck to go to school at all. But perhaps, like most of the New Yorkers, you wouldn't have considered this particularly lucky. For New York had no ideals of general education to uphold. Boston and Philadelphia had been settled by people passionately devoted to religious independence, even if it was of very different kinds; and the ability to read the Bible was thought all important. But New York had been founded to trade with the Indians; and though afterward it took more mental ability for the thrifty Dutch to outwit each other and the Quakers and Yankees than to outwit the ignorant natives, it was not the sort of mentality which at all made reading necessary. Furthermore, New York had suffered during the war more than any other American city, because it had been so long occupied by the enemy. What little striving there had been toward local education and culture naturally received a setback, and naturally it took the citizens a longer time to regain their former prosperity. The fate of three magazines which Charles Brockden Brown, our next literary figure, attempted to establish at the beginning of the new century, seems to show this. The two he began in New York ran only a year each, the one he began in Philadelphia ran for five years.

Yet Philadelphia must have been much annoyed that a son of hers, and the first man in America who tried to live by his pen, should have done this only important work in New York. It was the first indication she had that the despised Boeotia was going to turn out an Athens after all. Indeed, a prince was soon to choose Cinderella rather than her two laughing sisters. And it was only a few years after Brown's day that the leading

Philadelphia magazine, whose long continued existence all America had envied and marveled at, frankly implored her citizens to rally and support the home product, as New York with its new authors and its new magazine was threatening their supremacy.

### III.

Brown's lifetime was less than half that of Treneau's, and fitted into the exact middle of it. His important work was crowded feverishly into about three years. In it, unlike Treneau, he imitated an English style; but unlike the epic writers, he imitated a style which was as much his natural voice as if he had invented it himself. He was our first important writer of novels, and the kind he imitated has been called the "nightmare" novel.

Like all the previous English literary fashions, this came to be imitated in America only when the days of its greatest popularity at home were already gone. When you go into the country for your summer vacation, especially if you go far away, you have had the experience perhaps of finding that people there were just taking up an idea or fad that you in the city have known about for some time and are perhaps tired of now. So it was in America in the days when communication with the Old World was very slow and very infrequent. Though this particular style was imitated in America while it was still running in England, the "nightmare" novel there was now beginning to give way to the more sensible novels of Walter Scott and the entirely natural novels of Jane Austen. There was nothing sensible or natural whatever about the "nightmare" novel.

It was ever like the most blood-curdling movie you have seen, so filled with hair-breadth escapes and wild doings that the characters have never a quiet moment for any little ordinary action to convince you that they are real people. You think that the only possible explanation of such goings-on is that you will find at the end that it has all been a nightmare. Yet if by any chance you have seen such a movie or play and shivered cold and thrilled hot through the whole of it you are quite disgusted if you are told in the end you were only looking at the antics of a dream or of a crazy person after all. You feel then that you have been cheated into your shivers and thrills. It was so with Brown's stories. Five reels of horrors and terrors, only to find at the end some commonplace explanation that annoys you. You would rather have the whole thing frankly and desperately improbable than to have it tiresomely explained to you how it was just possible. Take our advice and, if you write a "horror" story when you grow up, don't explain a single thing in the last chapter.

But you must not blame Brown for doing what most novelists even nowadays have not learned to avoid. Perhaps they can't help it, since Americans are such practical people that they want even their mystery stories to work out sensibly at the very end. If you should read one of Brown's stories (and, really, sometimes they give you delicious creeps) you would feel they were told rather stiffly. But that way of writing belongs to the age, and you mustn't mind that. The chief fault of his stories is due to hate; he never took time to think them out properly.

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## Cornelia Connelly

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